

NatureNotes



Born and bred in St Albans, Rupert has enjoyed observing and recording local wildlife for over 30 years. Drawing inspiration and insight from the sights and sounds that accompany the seasons throughout the year, he invites you to tune in to the often overlooked natural world all around us.

Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world

Twitter @rupertevershed Blog: www.notingnature.wordpress.com

Power of the peregrine

There are some subjects in the natural world that have acquired celebrity status, catching our attention and maybe capturing our imagination in some way.

In Britain, the robin has endeared itself to us for its trusting familiarity; the barn owl for its ghostly, twilight flights; and the kingfisher for its dazzling, jewel-like qualities in the, often, drab ensemble of British birds. However, for me, there is one bird that tops the charts of iconic subjects and that is the peregrine falcon.

Certainly not as familiar as the robin, the sighting of a hunting peregrine will however, undoubtedly leave a lasting impression. There was a time when seeing a peregrine would have been nigh on impossible as the falcon faced near extinction in this country following the use of deadly chemical pesticides after the war.

The author, JA Baker, who made it his obsession to track and observe the peregrine in his local Essex

countryside in the 1960s, despaired as he saw the birds he loved vanish: "For 10 years I followed the peregrine. I was possessed by it. It was a grail to me. Now it has gone. The long pursuit is over. Few peregrines are left, there will be fewer, they may not survive. Many die on their backs, clutching insanely at the sky in their last convulsions, withered and burnt by the filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals."

Baker died in 1987, perhaps too early to witness the dramatic comeback of the peregrine after the poisonous pesticides were banned in the '70s. He could not have foreseen either how the peregrine would adapt, seeking the urban jungle instead of the open countryside, such that now the greatest density of peregrine falcons on earth is to be found in New York City.

Maybe, like me, it is in the urban environment that you have seen peregrines. I have stood by the tall Tate Modern tower straining my neck and eyes to pick out a tiny dot – a peregrine – at the top, whilst an

RSPB observer recites – as if reading the specifications for a high-performance car – the attributes of this extraordinary falcon. Top speed: just over 242mph – the fastest member of the animal kingdom; nictitating membranes on their eyes to maintain clear vision at high speeds; aerodynamic nasal cavities to assist with powerful airflow; and huge eyeballs eight times better than our own, capable of piercing the horizon to locate its prey.

While it is great to see peregrines in London the good news is that they are now gracing the skies of St Albans too. I was lucky enough recently to encounter two birds perched on pylons high over farmland on the edge of St Albans. Drawn by the 400 strong flocks of winter thrushes in the fields it wasn't long before the peregrines did what they do best: hunt. I stood enrapt, spellbound as the drama unfolded.

No other predator holds such power over the landscape as the peregrine falcon. A fox will attract a squawking jay, an owl will draw a

■ The peregrine.
Picture: STEVE ROUND



mob of small birds and a sparrowhawk will startle the birds at the feeder, but the peregrine grips the whole land in terror. So fast is its attack that prior warning is seldom given and the first indication of the falcon's presence is the explosion of panicking birds that it has targeted.

Diving or 'stooping' at over 200mph, the peregrine singles out a weaker bird and like a heat-seeking missile twists and turns until impact. The drama is brief, a direct hit means instant death for the prey but if the dive is dodged, the would-be prey may stand a chance, as the peregrine does not waste energy on long pursuits. If caught the hapless prey will be quickly dispatched, its spinal cord severed by a quick twist of the falcon's specially notched beak.

The trauma does not end here

however, for as the peregrine flies, so a 'bow-wave' of fear and escaping birds rises before it. Though you may not see it any longer, the falcon's path can be traced as crashing flocks of pigeons explode from neighbouring woods and in the distance still more flocks rise and disperse. The pace of disruption across the land is staggering and marks the sheer speed of the peregrine's flight.

Once the peregrine has gone everything returns to normal except that you are left with a feeling of having been exercised, along with the whole landscape, into a moment of extreme alertness, a holding of the breath. The whole experience is both brutal and magnificent, reflecting the bitter cold days and wide-open landscapes of these harsh winter months.